



Whatever It Is, I Don't Like It

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It takes a particular kind of man to want an embroidered polo player astride his left nipple. Occasionally, when I am tired and emotional, or consumed with self-dislike, I try to imagine myself as someone else, a wearer of Yarmouth shirts and fleecy sweats, of windbreakers and rugged Tyler shorts, of baseball caps with polo players where the section of the brain that concerns itself with aesthetics is supposed to be. But the hour passes. Good men return from fighting Satan in the wilderness the stronger for their struggle, and so do I.

The winner of the 2010 Man Booker Prize, Howard Jacobson, brims with life in this collection of his most acclaimed journalism. From the unusual disposal of his father-in-law's ashes and the cultural wasteland of Chitty Chitty Bang Bang to the melancholy sensuality of Leonard Cohen and desolation of Wagner's tragedies, Jacobson writes with all the thunder and joy of a man possessed. Absurdity piles upon absurdity, and glorious sentences weave together to create a hilarious, heartbreaking and uniquely human collection. This book is not just a series of parts, but an irresistible, unputdownable sum which triumphantly out-Thurbers Thurber.

Watch Howard Jacobson talking about *Whatever It Is, I Don't Like It*

Whatever It Is, I Don't Like It Details

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Clayton H says

Jacobson has an acute observational intellect that is only bested by his literary gift as a writer. To put the two abilities together in one person, well, God mustn't have been paying attention.

Thank God!

After reading this collection of articles from his newspaper column I'm left to wonder if Jacobson could (can) do comedy - I admit to having not read his novels yet - and I may do so now - but if he was twenty years younger I'd have wagered he could (had he'd been inclined and his income depended on it) have out-Seinfelded Seinfeld. He certainly could have been the writer and left the stagecraft to Jerry.

A number of these articles are pure joy; honest reflections on aging, the bafflements of the gender divide, the brashness of youth and so it goes. Some of my favourites aren't necessarily the joyful ones but those where he reflects on acquaintance and friendship in particular on losing his friend Simon Gray and almost-friend Harold Pinter.

A number are equally entertaining and thought provoking as socio-political commentary, or outrage, or derision, or enlightenment from a man that has the command of words at his fingers and enough sense, balance and self-esteem to know it.

A highly enjoyable book (Howard - if you're reading this :) and, yes, I came to it - through that utterly detestable, utterly compelling, utterly deserved Man Booker win...(the final article in Howard's book brings context to this closing remark). The Man Booker prize has done me an unexpected favour in leading me to this book without ever engaging Finkler's question.

Peter Holz says

Whatever it was, I didn't like it. I didn't finish it either.

Mark says

A collection of columns(observations, opinions) written by Howard Jacobson with the Independent from 1998 to 2011. Some were very funny and remain relevant. I admit I had to return to my dictionary now and then just to be sure of what I was reading. Not a quick read for me. I left it alone several times over four weeks but always went back.

Jane says

I suppose I am not surprised that in a collection of essays written by an old white man there were several opinions I'd find problematic. I can't tell if it was sufficiently funny to forgive it. It was about a third amusing, a third disappointing, and a third about some obscure British things I have no idea about.

Katherine says

Thanks to an interview he did with Audible, I discovered that Howard Jacobson was a person whom I was interested in reading. As it was the man who interested me, not the plot of one of his novels, I decided to start with his journalism. Having done that and found that I like the way he writes, if not all that he has to say (the views expressed in this book on terrorism and the Human Rights Act are deeply troubling), I will read *The Finkler Question* in the near future and then, maybe, *My Name is Shylock*, which was the focus of that Audible interview.

Sarah Hunter says

I'm sure this guy is sick of Woody Allen comparison's! Apologies Howard, but here's another one :) A great read that rocks along - he's more intellectual than Woody - less whimsical. Expect lots of laughs and be prepared to have your outlook altered. I want to give it 3.5 stars but don't know how.

Jill says

"Whatever it is" is a collection of Jacobson's columns for the Independent newspaper.

This was a joy to read – Jacobson has a beautiful way with words – mellifluous if you like. His topics are wide ranging - from menacing cyclists to porn for the Prince, from popular culture to politics - he almost comes across as a bit of a curmudgeon but this is thoroughly tempered by his beautifully humorous turn of phrase. Very funny

Laura says

Whatever it was, I didn't like it.

There were few good, coherent and insightful pieces, but mostly I felt I was reading random ramblings of the slightly drunken man in the corner of the pub. I know that in life and speech people go off tangent, but it just doesn't work in the written format.

Also, what this book made me realise (maybe I've known it subconsciously though) that being a snob requires a certain level of bigotry.

Dianne says

Reminds me of Christopher Hitchens in that 1) he's an intellectual, and 2) sometimes he drags in references to ideas/events/people I'm blank on...however he doesn't do that as much as Hitchens, and he's more readable than Hitchens.

However, he's at least as thought-provoking and stimulating as Hitchens, and he can write an essay-length statement on something that ends with the splendid (and sometimes shocking) ending of great essays, something I always admire.

Mr Stewart F Chanter says

So so. I've not long finished the Finkler question which was great and clearly he's a top writer. Some of the articles are very funny. I just got a little bit bored of the anti-everything. I know he's trying to be contrary and cynically funny but I got a bit worn out half way through. Not terrible but I found myself flipping through some and only reading those that I was interested in. I'll definitely read some other novels of his but then again I guess he wouldn't give a damn as I'm not intelligent / high brow enough to appreciate his wit and literary genius!

Benjamin Obler says

I'm completely charmed. And edified. And enlightened. And admiring. Jacobsen's voice strikes a delightful mix of humor, erudition, insight, and reflection. He only touches on current events enough to ground each essay in topicality. He's not capable of belligerence--he is an Englishman after all. But he's also somehow managed to divest all snootiness, if he ever had any. And his wit is so dry, you'll want a lozenges, lotion, steamers--yet it doesn't chafe.

Don't let the title fool you: these are not curmudgeonly rants. As he addresses straight off in the introduction, the title "suggests a querulousness I don't honestly lay claim to." Instead, at the heart of his aesthetic is the warmest, most generous understanding of humanity and an open-eyed view of creation. Not to say he is drippily opinionless. Not at all. He's quite outspoken on the fatuousness of Ralph Lauren naming a garment The Chatfield Pant, for example. A trip to Australia to see an Aboriginal musical, a visit to an Edinburgh graveyard, going to the opera--each sets off a short riposte on economics, expression in the arts, our legacy as employees, etc. Of the first dozen or so, the most sublime is the report of meeting a pelican on foot in a park. In trying to quote it, I find I cannot remove just one line.

I'm especially in favor of the form; no essay is longer than four pages (owing to their original form, no doubt, as columns in The Independent). Makes for great reading. Try it.

Karen says

Enjoyable - partly because they are bite-size article-length pieces on a wide variety of topics which are frequently humorous, but also I think because Mr Jacobson tackles subjects that others avoid and is prepared to say things which are decidedly un-p.c. at times. It is also good to read a columnist whose self-deprecation appears to be sincere and without the hidden motive of making you want to think more favourably of him. Realism, especially when personally directed, is a rare quality, and one which I admire, but then honesty is my kind of truth.

MJ Nicholls says

When semi-successful novelists publish x number of well-reviewed books and have large enough public or media profiles, broadsheets offer them weekly or fortnightly columns which, depending on their popularity, can run for years and years and provide the novelists with an influx of extra income, saving them from the necessary lunge into teaching or humiliating copyediting work for conglomerate ghouls. This seems a more standard practice in Britain than America, where commissioned articles (i.e. essays or belle-lettrism) of greater intellectual substance for one-off fees seems to be the usual sideline for the novelist to the biennial-book-and-royalties norm that barely provides the writer with enough to fund his kids' shoes. So you can see why the column would be a more tempting prospect for a novelist (who wants to write *novels*, damn you!), especially if he can treat the column with only 20% of the seriousness he treats his fiction. Howard Jacobson has been writing for *The Independent* since 1998, which explains why these pieces are all uniformly 3½ pages in length, and flit between comic musings, barroom chatter, opinionated blather and topical prattle, while although debonair and erudite and entertaining, pretty much ends up seeming like fish-and-chip fodder of the classiest calibre: fun but forgettable. The writer's financial safety is the reader's loss—same with Will Self. When will he stop titting about with these samey columns and write lengthy essays that befit his towering intellect? Same goes for HJ here.

Derren Hinch says

TWAT!

Jo says

Mixed bag, like most short article books, some I loved, some were ok and some bored me. He is a clever and articulate writer and I think I may have enjoyed the book more had I read a few at a time (perhaps between other books) rather than trying to read it all at once.
